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Economic Attitudes, Social Attitudes and Their Psychological Underpinnings – A Study of the Finnish Political Elite

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We investigated the relation between economic and social attitudes and the psychological underpinnings of these attitudes in candidates ($N = 9515$) in the Finnish 2017 municipal elections. In this politically elite sample, right-wing economic attitudes and social conservatism were positively correlated ($r = 0.41$), and this correlation was predominantly driven by those on the economic left being socially liberal, and vice versa. In terms of underlying psychological processes, consistent with dual process models of political ideology, the anti-egalitarian aspect of social dominance orientation was more strongly associated with right-wing economic attitudes, and the conventionalism and aggression aspects of right-wing authoritarianism with social conservatism. Our results show that even in a non-United States context in which the masses organize their political attitudes on two independent dimensions, these dimensions are moderately aligned among certain parts of the political elite, and that the political attitudes of the political elite can be traced to underlying psychological motivations. We argue that equality concerns could play a role in explaining why the left-right and liberal-conservative dimensions are more strongly aligned among those on the left and those more liberal.

Keywords: political attitudes, political elite, left-right dimension elections, liberal-conservative, authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, dual process models, political ideology

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INTRODUCTION

Although political psychology is often defined as an interdisciplinary field in which psychological concepts and methods are used to test theories about elite and mass political behavior, most of the empirical research has focused on mass publics. Moreover, much of this research has been conducted in a two-party system – the United States. From this literature, we know that (1) economic and social attitudes are more strongly aligned among the highly educated and politically engaged, (2) right-wing people tend to show more heterogeneity in their social attitudes, and (3) economic and social attitudes have distinct psychological underpinnings, an idea often referred to as the dual process model of ideology. The purpose of the present research was to extend upon this literature by investigating to what extent similar patterns can be found in the political elite in a typical Western European multi-party system.

More specifically, we investigated the relation between economic and social attitudes and the psychological underpinnings of these attitudes among the almost 10,000 candidates in the Finnish 2017 municipal elections who had responded to the two largest voting advice applications (VAAs)

hosted by the largest national newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, religion and traditional morality in politics, and patriotism and by the Finnish National Broadcasting company, YLE (Karvonen, 2014). The former application included measures of economic and social attitudes and the latter included items adapted from measures of right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, two of the currently most researched conceptualizations of the psychological underpinnings of political attitudes.

The Economic and Social Dimensions of Political Attitudes

Prior research has provided conflicting accounts regarding the extent to which economic and social political attitudes tend to be aligned on one dimension. Although the language and forms of social organization, rhetoric of the political elite – politicians, social scientists, philosophers, and the media – often operationalizes political attitudes as a unidimensional continuum, ranging from left to right, or liberal to conservative, research on public opinion has since the 1960s suggested that this may be a poor description of the political attitudes of the masses (Conover, 1964). A considerable body of work now demonstrates that political attitudes are often multifaceted, better described by two dimensions—an economic/social dimension and a social/cultural dimension (Lane, 1962; Conover and Feldman, 1981; Duckitt, 2001; Weber and Federico, 2007).

Regarding the economic dimension of attitudes, right-wing (as opposed to left-wing) economic policies focus on a large role for free markets and individual action, rejection or retrenchment of the welfare state, whereby the state's role is limited to the provision of public goods and the correction of market failures and general economic orthodoxy, revolving around the ideas of limited public finance, balanced government budgets, and strong property rights (e.g., Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). By contrast, left-wing economic ideas build on the necessity of regulating the free market. Such ideas include the expansion of the welfare state and education (Bobbie, 1996), claims for economic planning and market regulation, and also more radical ideas about the nationalization of enterprises and government control of the economy (Budge et al., 2006; Jahn, 2011). In the Finnish context, differences between the left and the right often revolve around taxes, public welfare expenditure, privatization, and deregulation (Karvonen, 2014).

Social conservatism (as opposed to liberalism) can broadly speaking be defined as “resistance to change and the tendency to prefer safe, traditional and conventional forms of institutions and behavior” (Wilson, 1973, p. 4). A central tenet of social conservatism is that for social harmony, a certain amount of consistency needs to be maintained in the social fabric.

Social conservatism emphasizes the importance of preserving ties that bind people together, such as family, religion and customs, making traditional morality and a national way of life central for social conservatism (Budge et al., 2006; Klingemann et al., 2006). In the Finnish context, typical dividing issues between social conservatives and liberals are immigration, same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, the

Determinants of the Alignment Between Economic and Social Attitudes

The extent to which the economic and social dimensions of political attitudes are aligned has been shown to depend on both cultural and individual-level characteristics (Jost et al., 2009). The two dimensions of political attitudes have been historically intertwined: As Western societies have moved incrementally toward greater equality, progress has meant increased egalitarianism, whereas resistance to change has generally been associated with maintenance of traditional, more hierarchical forms of social organization. However, in the last decades, the organization of political attitudes has been argued to have become increasingly two-dimensional (Bornschiefer, 2010). Indeed, using survey data from 99 nations, a recent study found that the alignment of right-wing economic attitudes (acceptance of inequality) with social conservatism (adherence to tradition) is globally uncommon (Malka et al., 2017). The unidimensional continuum that tends to organize the language and rhetoric of the political elite is more likely to be found within modern and developed nations, and even there, primarily in two-party or two-bloc systems, such as the United States or the United Kingdom (Malka et al., 2017). Research employing the nationally representative data sets of the World Values Survey shows that also in Finland, as well as many other Western European countries, the correlation between the economic and social dimensions of political attitudes is virtually zero among the mass public (Malka et al., 2017). However, this may not necessarily be the case among the political elite. At least in some contexts, alignment between the economic and social dimensions is conditional on a person's level of political engagement. In the United States, those who are highly educated (Sidanius and Du y, 1988) and highly politically engaged (Sidanius and Du y, 1988; Federico and Schneider, 2007) are the most likely to organize their economic and social attitudes along one dimension, whereas those low in political engagement are more likely to adopt a “mixed bag” of attitudes (for a review, see Feldman, 2013). This has generally been argued to be a consequence of the more educated and politically engaged following the elite political competition that in a two-party system such as the United States tends to occur along only one dimension (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). We will investigate whether political engagement is similarly associated with a more unidimensional structuring of political attitudes in a context such as the Finnish context, in which two virtually uncorrelated dimensions are necessary to describe the political attitudes of the mass public. The degree of alignment between economic and social attitudes may also depend on where on the left-right continuum the person falls. In the United States, as in other two-party systems, economic right-wing attitudes tend to be rather strongly aligned with social conservatism (Malka et al., 2017). However, among those on the right there are groups of people with very different political, psychological, moral, and

demographic profiles (Ellis and Stimson, 2012; Weber and Federico, 2013; Feldman and Johnston, 2014; Davis et al., 2016). The heterogeneity of the right on social issues has been argued to be due to the mobilization network of subtle hierarchy-enhancing beliefs and social policies, of the religious right in the 1970s and President Reagan in the 1980s, and manifested in an affinity for ideologies and policies that ability to appeal to both economically and socially conservative voters, attracting these previously separate factions to the Republican Party (Lienesch, 1982; Dionne, 1991; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2005). This type of historically contextual and particular explanation would imply that the heterogeneity of the right is specific to the United States context. However, there could be something more general about this pattern, and we investigate to what extent it applies to the Finnish political elite.

Psychological Underpinnings of the Holding of Political Attitudes

The present research also sought to contribute to the current renaissance on research on how certain types of ideas appeal to certain types of people. Basic psychological motivations and tendencies have often been argued to underlie ideological differences. Two of the most researched individual difference predictors of political attitudes are right-wing authoritarianism

The Purpose of the Present Research

Founding our study on the fundamental idea that there exist two separate dimensions of political attitudes – the economic and social dimensions (for a recent review and empirical support, see Malka et al., 2017) – we sought to investigate the extent to which these two dimensions are aligned among the almost 10,000 candidates in the Finnish 2017 municipal elections. Research conducted in the context of the United States two-party system suggests that the two dimensions are aligned among the political elite and that the alignment between the two dimensions is stronger among those on the economic left and those more socially liberal, as compared to those on the economic right and more socially conservative. The novelty of our research lies in investigating these ideas in a multi-party context in which the correlation between the economic and social dimensions of political attitudes is virtually zero in the mass public (Malka et al., 2017). Our results could thus, first, help determine whether there among the political elite exists an association between the two dimensions of political attitudes even in contexts in which the mass public thinks of them as completely separate dimensions. Second, our results could help clarify whether there is some generalizability to the result that it is particularly those on the left and those socially liberal among whom the two dimensions are interrelated, or whether this pattern is specific to the United States. Third, we sought to investigate the possible psychological motivations underpinning political attitudes, or more precisely, whether aspects of RWA and SDO are associated with social conservatism and economic right-wing attitudes, respectively. The novelty of this research thus lies in the non-United States multi-party setting in which political attitudes are bi-dimensionally organized and the focus on the political elite. Focusing on the attitudes of the political elite is by itself important – political elites often dominate the political environment, influence the attitudes and opinions of mass publics, and shape collective action

SDO was originally defined as the preference for group-based hierarchy and inequality. However, there is now mounting evidence that SDO needs to be conceptually divided into preference for systems where high-status groups dominate low-status groups (SDO Dominance) and preference for systems where inequality is maintained by hierarchy-enhancing ideologies and policies (SDO Anti-egalitarianism; Ho et al., 2015). Whereas SDO Dominance is related to blatant racism

(e.g., Statham and Geddes, 2006; Loizides, 2008); yet, there is very little large-scale survey research on the attitudes of the elites.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Procedure

Participants were those 9515 (4164 female; 48.8%) candidates in the Finnish 2017 municipal elections who had completed both the voting application hosted by the Finnish National Broadcasting company and the national newspaper Helsingin Sanomat. The former included items pertaining to authoritarian tendencies and the latter included measures of right-wing economic attitudes and social conservatism. Candidates responded to the voting advice application before it was opened to the general public and were not aware of how other candidates had responded. The mean age of the candidates was 44.57 years (SD = 12.96; range 18–87). There were in total 36,616 candidates in the Finnish 2017 municipal elections. As compared to the 27,101 candidates who did not respond to the YLE and HS voting advice applications, those who had completed both of these voting applications (that is, our sample of 9515 candidates) were somewhat younger (the mean age of all candidates was 50 years) and women were somewhat overrepresented (40% of all candidates were women). All data is Open Data and available from the Helsingin Sanomat and YLE websites. Although the data is un-anonymous, local and national guidelines did not require ethics approval because all data is open access public data.

Highest education attained was coded into four categories, with categories representing participants with no secondary education ($n = 222$; 2.3%), with a vocational or high school degree ($n = 992$; 10.4%), with a bachelor's degree or university applied sciences degree ($n = 2195$; 23.1%), and participants with higher than bachelor's degree ($n = 5045$; 53.0%). Altogether 1061 participants did not report their education.

Political engagement was coded into four categories, with categories representing no previous political experience ($n = 3081$; 32.4%), activity in political party at the municipal level ($n = 3323$; 34.9%), elected for a municipal office or council ($n = 2929$; 30.8%), and elected in national elections ($n = 142$; 1.5%). Forty participants (0.4%) did not respond to this question.

Yearly income was entered in six categories, with categories representing less than 20,000€ ($n = 1418$; 14.9%), 20,000–30,000€ ($n = 1481$; 15.6%), 30,000–50,000€ ($n = 2689$; 28.3%), 50,000–70,000€ ($n = 979$; 10.3%), 70,000–100,000€ ($n = 384$; 4.0%), and above 100,000€ ($n = 148$; 1.6%). A total of 2416 (25.4%) participants did not report their income. The average yearly income in Finland in the year 2015 was 28,750€, with around 40% earning below 20,000€, 20% earning 20,000–30,000€, 25% earning 30,000–50,000€, and the remaining 15% earning above 50,000€. The lowest income bracket was thus somewhat underrepresented in our sample.

in general, candidates were somewhat higher educated and had somewhat higher income than the population in general. However, the differences were relatively small, and the candidates do not constitute a socioeconomic elite. Municipal elections do not involve significant constitutional office and do not attract large scale media coverage. Only a small minority of candidates are “career politicians” who are politicians by occupation or have a history of active campaigning and public visibility.

Measures

The items assessing economic and social attitudes that were used in the Helsingin Sanomat VAA were adapted from items in the World Values Survey and the European Social Survey (Ylä-Anttila, 2011). Economic attitudes were measured with four items: “Public services should be evermore privatized,” “If a situation arises in which it is necessary to either cut down on public services and social security benefits or raise taxes, raising taxes is the better option” (reverse scored), “Large income differences are acceptable, as an appropriate reward for differences of talent and dedication,” and “In the long run, the current levels of public service and social security benefits burden the public budget too much.” Each item was responded to on a scale from one (completely disagree) to five (completely agree), where higher numbers indicate more right-oriented responses. The mean score was 2.632 (SD = 1.012). Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability was 0.800.

Social attitudes were measured with four items: “Gay and lesbian couples should have the same marriage and adoption rights as heterosexual couples” (reverse scored), “If the state orders to set up a refugee center in my home municipality, the order should be accepted” (reverse scored), “School is too indulgent toward pupils. Stricter discipline would make schools better,” and “Traditional values, such as family values, religion, and patriotism, provide a sound basis for politics.” Each item was responded to on a scale from one (completely disagree) to five (completely agree). The higher the number, the more conservative the responses. The mean score was 2.780 (SD = 1.019) and alpha was 0.747.

The items that we employed to measure the psychological underpinnings of political attitudes were included in the VAA hosted by the Finnish national broadcasting company YLE. The length of the questionnaire had been set to thirty items, of which six were allocated to the measurement of psychologically relevant variables that could be expected to underlie political attitudes. Due to these space constraints set by YLE we could not use pre-existing scales, but were allowed to create, in close collaboration with journalists, six relatively simple, socially appropriate, and short items that would be interesting to those completing the measures and to readers, meaning that the items not be very similar to each other. These restrictions ruled out the possibility to use well-established multi-item scales. Instead, we tried to approach RWA and SDO – perhaps the two currently most popular individual difference predictors of political ideology – from various theoretical perspectives, with the intention of covering the breadth of the constructs rather than striving to maximize internal consistency reliability.

¹<https://github.com/HS-Datadesk/avoindata/tree/master/vaalikoneet/kuntavaalit2017>

²<https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-9526290>

(this approach is often advocated in the development of short individuals who occupy approximately the same rank on the measures; e.g., Gosling et al., 2003; McCrae et al., 2011). scales of economic and social attitudes will contribute strongly to the overall correlation, whereas those individuals who occupy very different ranking positions contribute less, or negatively, to the overall correlation. The index that reflects each individual's contribution, referred to as r_i , is computed according to the Asendorpf (1990, 1992) formula: $r_i = (z_{Eco} - z_{Soc})^2 / 2$, where z_{Eco}

The possible precursors or psychological underpinnings of political attitudes were measured with six items that were responded to on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The items were designed to assess the psychological underpinnings of political ideology, but we selected them and modified them to take into consideration the public nature of the responses. In essence, we sought to create items the responses to which would not be dictated too strongly by social desirability concerns (this meant excluding items assessing, e.g., preference for violent maintenance of oppressive hierarchies, blatant forms of dehumanization, racism).

The six items are presented in Table 1. Also presented are the item loadings from a three-factor solution that accounted for 66,099% of the total variance (maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation), with the three first factors explaining 29.606, 20.094, and 16.399% of the variance (the number of factors was determined by parallel analysis). The first factor was labeled SDO – Anti-egalitarianism. The subtle, hierarchy-enhancing beliefs (i.e., meritocratic beliefs) that load highly on this factor manifest an affinity to ideologies and policies that maintain inequality. The second factor, representing submissiveness to rules as well as to rulers, was labeled Authoritarian Conventionalism. The third factor, with high loading of the two items that emphasized reluctance to compromise and the need to fight, was labeled Authoritarian Aggression.

Computation of Alignment Between Economic and Social Attitudes

Asendorpf (1990, 1992) showed that the overall Pearson correlation between two variables can be decomposed into the individual contributions of each of the pairs of scores from which a correlation is computed. In our case this means that the contribution of each individual candidate's combination of economic and social attitudes to the overall correlation between economic and social attitudes could be computed. I.e., those

RESULTS

The Relation Between Economic and Social Attitudes

To illustrate the association between economic and social attitudes, we plotted social attitudes as a function of economic attitudes after first dividing the sample into deciles according to the latter. Inspection of Figure 1 shows that those on the economic left also tend to be rather liberal in terms of social attitudes. By contrast, those on the right appear to be freer to choose their social attitudes – the mean scores of even the right-most deciles in terms of economic attitudes fall around the mid-point of the social conservatism scale. A similar pattern can be seen in Figure 2, which depicts economic attitudes as a function of social conservatism. The more liberal tend to be rather left-wing, but the socially conservative appear not to be similarly constrained in terms of their economic attitudes. Thus, being economically right-oriented does not require that one is also socially conservative, or vice versa. On the other hand, those on the economic left tend to be rather socially liberal, and those who are socially liberal tend to be rather left in terms of economic attitudes. The correlations shown in Table 2 confirm what visual inspection of Figures 1, 2 already suggested. The correlation between right-wing economic attitudes and social conservatism

TABLE 1 | Descriptives of items pertaining to SDO and RWA and their loadings on three factors.

Item	M (SD)	Items loadings		
		SDO Anti-egalitarianism	RWA conventionalism	RWA aggression
In Finland everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.	0:324 .1:275/	0:628	0:104	0:122
If people were treated more equally we would have fewer problems in this country.	1:229 .1:036/	0:516	0:245	0:104
Things were not better before. Our way of living has changed for the better.	0:731 .1:068/	0:071	0:527	0:172
It is more important for children to be curious and independent than well-behaved and obedient.	0:438 .1:152/	0:131	0:465	0:061
What our country really needs is strong leadership that can solve problems without the need to compromise.	0:534 .1:275/	0:039	0:115	0:498
All life is basically a competition for power and resources. To succeed one has to fight.	0:094 .1:236/	0:306	0:125	0:497

FIGURE 1 | Social attitudes with 95% CIs as a function of deciles of economic attitudes.

was $r = 0.410$. This implies that the political elite, even $p < 0.001$] and both the linear ($b = 1.425$; $t = 28.790$) and quadratic ($b = 1.033$; $t = 20.863$) terms were statistically significant at step 2 of the regression analysis (both $p < 0.001$). Similarly, in the prediction of conservatism, adding right-wing dimensions squared to right-wing orientation added the amount of explained variance from adjusted $R^2 = 0.168$ (Step 1) to those more liberal: correlations and partial correlations (age and sex removed) between the Asendorpf index and being conservative ranged from around $r = 0.17$ to $r = 0.20$. $p < 0.001$] and both the linear ($b = 1.227$; $t = 24.778$) and quadratic ($b = 0.832$; $t = 16.793$) terms were statistically significant at step 2 (both $p < 0.001$). These exploratory regression analyses confirmed the existence of the type of dimensions of political attitudes are interrelated (Figures 1, 2) curvilinear quadratic effect that is suggested by Figures 1, 2; it further suggests that it is particularly those who are furthest to the left that are the most liberal. To investigate this, we explored the extent to which the association between the two dimensions is curvilinear. More specifically, we ran a regression analysis in which we predicted right-wing orientation with SDO Anti-egalitarianism ($r = 0.593$) and moderately both conservatism and with conservatism squared, entered at steps 1 and 2 of the regression analysis, respectively. Adding conservatism squared to the regression analysis increased the amount of explained variance from adjusted $R^2 = 0.168$ (Step 1) with both Authoritarian Conventionalism and Authoritarian Aggression ($r = 0.457$ and $r = 0.463$, respectively), but R^2 was statistically significant [F change (1,9512) = 435.275, $p < 0.001$].

Besides suggesting, as expected, that it is particularly those on the left and those socially liberal among whom the two dimensions of political attitudes are interrelated (Figures 1, 2) curvilinear quadratic effect that is suggested by Figures 1, 2; it further suggests that it is particularly those who are furthest to the left that are the most liberal. To investigate this, we explored the extent to which the association between the two dimensions is curvilinear. More specifically, we ran a regression analysis in which we predicted right-wing orientation with SDO Anti-egalitarianism ($r = 0.593$) and moderately both conservatism and with conservatism squared, entered at steps 1 and 2 of the regression analysis, respectively. Adding conservatism squared to the regression analysis increased the amount of explained variance from adjusted $R^2 = 0.168$ (Step 1) with both Authoritarian Conventionalism and Authoritarian Aggression ($r = 0.457$ and $r = 0.463$, respectively), but R^2 was statistically significant [F change (1,9512) = 435.275, $p < 0.001$].

